



The World Wide Web turns thirty

Level A2

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In March 1989, a 34-year-old British computer scientist called Tim Berners-Lee went to his boss with an idea. He gave him a document titled “Information Management: a Proposal”. Tim’s boss, Mike Sendall, read Tim’s document and wrote on its front page: “vague but exciting.” He encouraged Tim to develop his idea further. At the time, Tim was working at the CERN laboratories in Geneva where scientists were doing incredibly complex experiments. His proposal was inspired by a question that CERN scientists often asked: “How will we ever keep track of such a large project?” CERN scientists already used computers and the internet, but they had difficulties sharing the information regarding their experiments. To help them, Tim imagined a linked information system, or a web of documents, that, in his proposal, he called “Mesh”.



An act of desperation

Tim worked on his project for more than a year. Tim gave Mesh a new name, the World Wide Web, and at the end of 1990 he presented to CERN the world’s first website, the first Web server, and the first Web browser. The website was very simple: it described what the World Wide Web was, and how Web technology worked. The scientists at CERN finally got what they needed. “Creating the Web,” said Tim “was really an act of desperation, because the situation without it was very difficult.” Over the next two years Tim and other scientists at CERN continued developing the Web. In 1993 CERN made World Wide Web technology

available on a royalty-free basis. This meant that everybody could use it for free. Tim explains: “we were more interested in the excitement of making something useful than in getting rich.”

A present to the world

The World Wide Web became more than ‘something useful’. It revolutionized modern life. Today, thirty years after it was invented, some four billion people, about half of the world’s population, use it. There are now more than 1.5 billion websites. The Web is a tremendous source of information: it allows easy access to all kinds of documents, for example, this very article. The Web is also used to communicate, to work, to shop and for entertainment purposes. Tim imagined his creation to be a democratic arena with no central authority: everybody could use it to interact and share knowledge. In a way, the Web does what Tim wanted it to do, but it is also true that the Web has developed in unexpected and sometimes negative ways. Tim himself says that ‘the Web has failed in many places’.

Caught in the Web

Tim points out how today giant corporations such as Facebook, Google and Amazon monopolize everything that happens online. They possess an enormous amount of private information on all their users. Tim Berners-Lee is currently working on a new platform called Solid to re-decentralize the Web. Others like him are helping to make the Web a safe and democratic space once again. In the meantime, it is important to reflect on how dependent we are on being connected. In 1909, the British writer E.M. Forster wrote a prescient science fiction short story called *The Machine Stops* about a future where every human being lives alone in a room, served by an all-powerful Machine. The Machine provides them with everything, from music to food to clothing. Through the Machine a person can get to know thousands of people, but the Machine only gives “a general idea of people.” So humans live connected but isolated, with only a vague idea of each other. Interacting with the real world causes “the terrors of direct experience.” Forster’s story suggests that we have to be careful of how much we let technology control our lives and our social interactions. Technology needs to be a tool, not a master.

Useful links

1) *Learn more about Tim Berners-Lee and the creation of the World Wide Web:*

<https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/>

[\[https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/\]](https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/)

2) *Here is some interesting information about Tim Berners-Lee:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mhpQd3GNds> [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mhpQd3GNds)

[v=0mhpQd3GNds\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mhpQd3GNds)

3) *Check out this video explaining what the World Wide Web is. (You can add subtitles to help you out):*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8hzJxb0rpc> [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8hzJxb0rpc\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8hzJxb0rpc)

4) *What’s the difference between the internet and the World Wide Web? It’s explained here:*

https://www.webopedia.com/DidYouKnow/Internet/Web_vs_Internet.asp

[https://www.webopedia.com/DidYouKnow/Internet/Web_vs_Internet.asp]

5) Check out the world's first Website. You can even surf the Web using a re-creation of the first Web browser:

<https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web> [<https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web>]

COMPREHENSION

1) Read the article and complete the sentences with the right alternative.

1. Mike Sendall believed that Tim's idea

- a. needed more work.
- b. was not very good.
- c. was perfect the way it was.

2. CERN scientists complained that

- a. their projects were too large and complex.
- b. it was difficult to manage all the information created by large projects.
- c. Tim's proposal did not solve their problem.

3. Tim Berners-Lee wrote his Proposal

- a. to impress his boss.
- b. to help CERN scientists.
- c. to solve a computer problem.

4. The World Wide Web

- a. is owned by CERN.
- b. was sold, making Tim a rich man.
- c. was given away for free by CERN.

5. Today the World Wide Web

- a. is used for many different purposes.
- b. has more websites than users.
- c. has developed the way Tim wanted it to develop.

6. Tim Berners-Lee wanted the Web to be used

- a. for entertainment purposes.
- b. for scientific reasons.
- c. in a democratic way.

7. Tim Berners-Lee thinks that giant internet corporations

- a. are a good thing.
- b. are too powerful.
- c. spread fake news.

8. Giant internet corporations

- a. know very little about their users.
- b. know many things about their users.
- c. are interested in de-centralizing the Web.

9. The Web is

- a. not as democratic as it used to be.
- b. democratic.
- c. controlled by government agencies.

10. M. Forster's story suggests that being connected

- a. is a good thing.
- b. helps people interact with the real world.
- c. is not a substitute for direct experience.

VOCABULARY

2) Complete the sentences with the following words.

to keep track of * prescient * tool * available * billion * proposal * citizen * tremendous * entertainment * to monopolize

1. Today, all kinds of knowledge are easily _____ to anyone with an internet connection.
2. A hammer is a typical example of a _____: an object that helps perform a job.
3. Going to the cinema is a popular form of _____.
4. A thousand million is a _____.
5. Forster's story is _____ because it predicted the ever-increasing importance of technology.
6. If you do a _____ job it means that you did it very well.
7. Monopoly is a game that teaches what the verb _____ means: at the end of the game somebody ends up with all the money!
8. A _____ can be a formal suggestion, but also an offer of marriage.
9. I'm very interested in current events. I try _____ all the important things that happen in the world.
10. I feel at home everywhere I go. I consider myself a _____ of the world.

GRAMMAR - Active and passive voice

3) Turn these passive form sentences into active.

Es. Tim Berners-Lee was employed by CERN. / *CERN employed Tim Berners-Lee.*

1. The World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee.
2. The internet was used by the scientists at CERN.
3. Extremely complex experiments were carried out by CERN scientists.
4. World Wide Web technology was given away for free by Tim and CERN.

5. Modern life was revolutionized by Tim's invention.

Turn these active form sentences into passive.

Es. E.M. Forster wrote *The Machine Stops* . / *The Machine Stops was written by E.M. Forster.*

1. On the Web, people can access all kinds of information.
2. Tim designed the Web to be a democratic arena.
3. Corporations control us!
4. Tim developed a new platform called Solid.
5. We will all shape our digital future.

SHORT ESSAY

4) Can you imagine a world without the World Wide Web? How would your life be different? (60-80 words)

5) What do we mean by the word 'privacy'? What do you think should remain private and not be shared on the Web? (60-80 words)

(Carlo Dellonte)

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